

27TH ANNUAL SPECIAL OPERATIONS/LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT (SO/LIC) SYMPOSIUM & EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

By Mr. Andrew Borene, NDIA SO/LIC Board Member

& Ms. Elizabeth Irwin, M.A. Candidate, Georgetown University Center for Security Studies

The Annual Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict Symposium is the start of the SO/LIC calendar of events each year—bringing together more than 100 Exhibitors and more than 500 Attendees—to hear the priorities of Commanders, talk over fresh issues and potential solutions, and greet old friends. The 27th Annual event presentations have been summarized below.

2016 Theme: "Countering Hybrid Threats in a Complex World"

The speed, lethality, and cost of modern warfare make major state-on-state conflict involving the U.S. or our allies a very dangerous, yet unlikely, possibility. We will most likely encounter adversaries who exploit all instruments of national power short of war to achieve their objectives. Tactics such as subversion, propaganda, employing proxies and surrogates, and “lawfare” often negate the significant military advantage of the U.S. and our allies. Previously, the realm of non-state actors, hybrid conflict is now a tool of major powers. Anticipating, preventing, and defeating hybrid threats will require a shift in U.S. policies, authorities, and resources. This year’s SO/LIC Symposium examined those requirements and solutions.

Keynote 1: GEN Joseph Votel, USA, Commander, USSOCOM

General Votel discussed the importance of continuous collaboration and relationship building in the special operations community to field effective Special Operations Forces (SOF) for the nation. He described the role of SOF and the expectations surrounding what SOF can and should to fulfill national security objectives, as well as anticipated future missions for SOF. General Votel identified key capabilities that require greater investment, including advanced ballistic protection, ISR, and comprehensive signature management, and stressed the critical role that industry plays in fielding those necessary capabilities for the future force.

Panel 1: SOF Component Commanders (AFSOC, MARSOC, NAVSPECWARCOM & USASOC) Moderated by VADM Sean Pybus, USN, Deputy Commander, USSOCOM

The component commander panel was led and moderated this year by the Deputy Commander of US Special Operations Command, Vice Admiral Sean Pybus, USN and made a focus on emerging hybrid threats and needed innovation. Vice Admiral Pybus provided an overview of hybrid warfare and the growing prevalence of “gray zone” conflict, which requires greater SOF engagement in order to achieve US national strategic objectives. He asked the panelists to provide service-specific perspectives on the future operating environment and the necessary capabilities to enable SOF in the field. Lieutenant General Bradley Heithold, USAF, AFSOC Commander, stressed the Air Force “culture of innovation,” with its emphasis on strike evolution and networks. He said that AFSOC is making key investments in directed energy, tactical offboard sensors, and modernization of existing SOF platforms. Major General Joseph Osterman, USMC, MARSOC Commander, highlighted the growing need for integrated, interchangeable payloads for UAVs, as well as communication systems that are more easily integrated across the interagency and with partner nations. Rear Admiral Brian Losey, USN, of NAVSPECWARCOM

echoed the need to create effective, sustainable capabilities for partners to use and maintain, and discussed the Navy's efforts to refine precision munitions. Major General Clayton Hutmacher, USA, Deputy Commanding General USASOC, focused on the role of Army SOF in foreign internal defense, and to that end identified rotary aviation, ISR, and decentralized command and control platforms as key investment areas for the future.

Keynote 2: The Honorable Michael Lumpkin, Assistant Secretary of Defense, Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC)

Assistant Secretary Lumpkin spoke at length on the future threat landscape and its implications for SOF, suggesting that SOF will be the “preferred tool of modern warfare,” which in turn presents important, challenging opportunities for USSOCOM and the defense industry. As SOF remain engaged on the spectrum of conflict, there will be a growing need for scalable capabilities that can be transferred both to partner nations and eventually, general purpose forces. ASD Lumpkin emphasized the role of military information support teams, particularly in combating extremist ideology, and as such anticipates investments in information operations and related capabilities. Mr. Lumpkin also made the point that “whole-of-government” approaches and recruitment of America's best and brightest from military, civilian and private sectors will be needed to most effectively counter extremist ideology and win hybrid campaigns globally.

Panel 2: Congressional/Legal/Acquisition Experts

This panel moderated by Ms. Patricia Guitard, Deputy Chief Information Officer, Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, US Army, focused on key trends in the shifting international system, including the diffusion of power from nation-states to non-state actors and the proliferation of disruptive technologies. Ms. Theresa Whelan, PDASD, SO/LIC elaborated on what will become a greater reliance on special operations and thus a need for improved capabilities to enable SOF to perform missions, especially in highly contested or denied environments. Mr. James Smith, Deputy Director for Acquisition, SOF AT&L, USSOCOM underscored the unpredictability of hybrid threats and how the current acquisition process does not enable rapid responses to operational imperatives. He suggested the need for a more proactive approach to identifying requirements so that USSOCOM can field urgently needed capabilities more quickly. Captain Todd Huntley, US Navy JAG Attorney and Robert Geisler, Chief in the Strategy and Plans Strategic Capabilities Office at Office of the Secretary of Defense also discussed the importance of successful collaborative research, development, testing and evaluation (RDT&E) throughout the department and a desire for greater partnership with industry in a process that promotes innovation, recognizing that such partnerships may require a willingness on the part of DoD to assume more risk.

Keynote 3: MG Michael Repass, USA (Ret), Former Commander SOCEUR and USASOC

Major General Repass described the rise of hybrid warfare, particularly as practiced by Russia, and noted that industry should focus on countering the technological edge that some adversaries have over Western forces. Given U.S. dominance in conventional warfare, adversaries have prioritized investments in technologies that neutralize U.S. operational advantages and exploit the vulnerabilities in our highly networked, technology-dependent way of war. In order to combat “digital aggression,” Major General Repass said that SOF will need dependable, compatible, encrypted communications that can overcome any attempts at jamming or

interdiction. He also expects more frequent engagement in densely populated, urban environments, which will require precision fires and associated precision optics to detect and observe targets. He suggested that to assist industry in developing these capabilities, USSOCOM should create gray zone scenarios that illuminate the challenges of hybrid warfare and thus generate more productive dialogue between operators and industry.

Keynote 4: Dr. Sebastian Gorka, Distinguished Chair of Military Theory, USMC War College

Dr. Gorka presented his research on the evolution of irregular warfare and the implications for the ongoing fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (aka ISIL, ISIS or Daesh). He described the rise of ISIS and offered a comparative threat analysis between ISIS and Al Qaeda, suggesting that ISIS has emerged as a much larger threat with greater growth potential, and thus poses a particular challenge for SOF around the world. Dr. Gorka argued that while American SOF are without peer in the kinetic domain, they are losing the ability to conduct indirect action, and he contended that a lack of strategic understanding among policymakers further hinders SOF effectiveness. Therefore, the dilemma for civilian and military leaders in the special operations community is to recognize that SOF will need to enhance and expand its indirect action capabilities, as direct action alone will not win the current conflict. When asked to identify the ISIS center of gravity, Dr. Gorka recommended that the U.S. make a more concerted effort to counter extremist ideology and engage in foreign internal defense with Muslim allies.

Keynote 5: Mr. Jose Gonzalez, Director, Tactical Warfare Systems, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Acquisition, Technology & Logistics (AT&L)

Mr. Gonzalez provided an overview of current Defense Department-wide initiatives aimed at improving SOF-related acquisition. He discussed program and process improvements aimed at providing a faster acquisition model for SOF, and how to leverage acquisition categories and Better Buying Power 3.0 to field SOF capabilities. Mr. Gonzalez mentioned a growing focus on cyber and information operations at the OSD-level, as illustrated by the recent establishment of an electronic warfare office within AT&L. In particular, he spoke about the Rapid Innovation Fund (RIF), which “provides a collaborative vehicle for small businesses to provide the Department with innovative technologies that can be rapidly inserted into acquisition programs that meet specific defense needs.” He also commented on how SOF needs are addressed through the DoD Ordnance Technology Consortium (DOTC), and DoD’s goal for greater innovation by involving small businesses and other non-traditional partners in requests for proposal (RFP) processes.